

and the plant's root system had shriveled and become brittle. The tug of the bungees pulled Ruth, and the manzanita, away from the earth, slingshotting her — a hundred miles an hour and rump first — into the balloon's basket. The wicker explosion left Bob and Ellis and Ruth dangling from the gondola's tattered remnants, and it scattered the manzanita seeds over a square mile of dry ground, where they waited patiently for rain.

#### LITTLE SOY SAUSAGES

Ruth Leahy has a low aptitude for dealing with the general public, a deficiency that became apparent when she — on her first day on the job as a sample server in the Lucky's Food Store — attacked a man who told her that one of the little soy sausages she was frying up and handing out tasted like, "dog turds."

Which wasn't, by the way, what the camera and sound crew — hired by the sausage company to record the raving responses of the real people to their product — wanted to hear. Hidden behind the dairy case, they recorded Ruth's right cross to the man's eye followed by the chase down the frozen food aisle, the man hurdling the display freezer with Ruth — stocky and middle-aged, her high heels abandoned back by the frozen pizza — on his tail. And they recorded the smoking pan with its untended sausages and the cloudburst from the overhead fire sprinklers and the ensuing pandemonium.

Ruth, of course, lost her job. The sausage company burned the film. But the camera man had made a copy that he intended to sell to the 'Jokes and Jests' T.V. show, but Ruth wouldn't sign the release, and fame passed her by.

#### FORGET ALL ABOUT GALILEO

Ruth and Ellis and the sky-diving instructor huddled in the back of the tiny, two-propeller airplane. The little machine rattled and roared and wheezed and groaned, and finally climbed to the requisite three thousand feet.

Ruth and Ellis were taking their first jump. They'd gone through Loma Alta Sky-Diving School's indoctrination and instruction class that morning, where they and their classmates practiced leaping from a five-foot platform into loose sand, and they'd practiced pulling their imaginary rip cords, and they practiced rolling when they hit the ground. The instructor had made a crack about having to find an extra large 'chute for the fat lady (Ruth), and



Ruth gave him a fat lip for his attempted humor.

Ellis crouched in the doorway; he was first and he looked sick: the ground, to him, looked so very far away. The instructor shouted the preplanned command: "GET OUT." Ellis couldn't hear him over the noise of the propellers, but he read his lips: the crazy son-of-a-bitch was telling him to jump. Ellis stuck his head out the doorway and looked down, then back at the instructor to give him a chance to read lips, too. He said, "FUCK YOU." The instructor understood him but found his answer unacceptable.

Ellis spread-eagled himself and clawed at the four corners of the rectangular doorway, hanging on like a pot-bellied cat as Ruth and the instructor pushed on him and pounded his fingers and stomped on his toes. They finally dislodged him, and as Ruth stood with her hands on her hips, a smug smile on her face, watching her husband plummet toward earth, the instructor, still smarting from the punch in the mouth, gave her a little push and sent her falling, too.

Forget all about Galileo: Ruth roared earthward like a meteor and caught Ellis. She tangled in his just-opened 'chute, and they fell together, pulling and tugging at the twisted fabric above them, cursing and shooting quick and fearful glances at the rapidly approaching ground.

#### TO KINGDOM COME

Novice sky-divers Ruth and Ellis had a serious mishap on their very first jump: Ellis went first, with Ruth coming right behind him and tangling in his opening 'chute. They clung to each other as they fell, writhing and wrestling to see who would land on top and who would land on the bottom, while Ellis' unopened canopy whipped and snapped uselessly up above. As the earth's surface approached them, they were both convinced that they were on their way to Kingdom Come.

And that's where they'd have gone if Ellis hadn't remembered, three hundred feet from certain death, that he wasn't the only one there wearing a parachute: he pulled Ruth's rip cord and hung on with a bear hug.

The 'chute slowed them, but their velocity at impact was still potentially deadly. But the ground gave way and Ruth and Ellis descended into a large, dark cavern that no white man had ever seen before. Ruth's 'chute snagged and tangled in the roots of an old tree that didn't exist above ground anymore, and she and her husband bounced and swayed on the elastic cords next to a glistening stalactite.